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ABSTRACT

The possibility of using the distance mode of education in Asia is considered. There are many national systems of education in Asia, though many of them derive from British or American models. Language of instruction presents a problem for international access, and in some countries the various levels of education may use different languages. Some international languages such as Chinese and English may assist educational activity between countries. Potential use of the distance mode as a solution to various international problems is discussed in relation to vocational, general, and continuing education. Suggestions for facilitating a regional scheme of cooperation within Asia are offered that deal with matters of organization, accreditation and validation, finance, and language. Possible models include transfer of credits, joint awards, and cooperative specialized production of subject packages. It is suggested that an international body such as the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) would be the appropriate organizer of a regional scheme on behalf of Asian nations. It is noted that any scheme will have to consider six points: production of packaged learning resources, copyright and translation of packages, feedback between tutor and student, accreditation and validation, transfer of credits, and joint awards. It is suggested that distance education is a valid method of learning, and cooperation should ensure that the best learning facilities in Asia are available to each student. Most objections will likely be due to difficulties in the administration of cooperative schemes, and considerable planning would have to precede the operation of a regional cooperative scheme for distance education. (Author/SW)

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SESSION 7

A REGIONAL SCHEME FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ASIA

BY

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REGIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON DISTANCE TEACHING IN ASIA. Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. 4 - 7 May 1981.

A REGIONAL SCHEME FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ASIA.

by Edward R. Reid-Smith

ABSTRACT

The paper opens by noting that there are many national systems of education in Asia, though many of them derive from British or American models. Language of instruction presents a problem, and in some countries the various levels of education may use different languages. Some international languages such as Chinese and English may assist educational mobility between countries.

The possibilities of using the distance mode as a solution to various international problems is discussed, in relation to vocational, general and continuing education. Several suggestions are made which would facilitate a regional scheme within Asia, dealing with matters of organisation, accreditation and validation, finance, language, etc. Possible models include transfer of credits, joint awards, and co-operative specialised production of subject packages.

It is suggested that an international body such as UNESCO would be the appropriate organiser of a regional scheme on behalf of Asian nations.

1. NATIONAL SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION

1.1 Although the geographers may present Asia as a well-defined part of the world, it is in fact an area rich with differences in culture, climate, language, religion, prosperity, and history. All these have combined to create quite distinct educational systems to serve national aspirations. At the same time there is a unifying overlap between countries which makes a community of interest and activity much easier in certain areas.

1.2 It is the intention of this paper to make a brief survey of some differences and common factors, and to suggest ways in which Asian countries may use both similarities and differences to their advantage in distance education.

1.3 Firstly, we must recognise that each country has its own basic educational system whereby national culture is transmitted. This was once done within family and community groups, before formal schools were established when the need for subject knowledge increased. Other learning took place within institutions set up to transmit the wisdom of the religious and philosophical bases of cultures which crossed national boundaries.

1.4 Formal educational systems incorporating schools and colleges or universities may have been taken from models developed in other countries, and this has helped educational access to be international. For example, in the Philippines and in Korea I recognise American influence on higher education, though there are also some differences. One similarity is that undergraduate degree courses take four years of study, and basic professional awards are at the master's degree level in both countries.

This contrasts with the three-year bachelor's degrees offered in India and Australia and the existence of graduate diplomas, based on the traditional British university system. These are part of the 'colonial' inheritance of some Asian countries, and although the models may well satisfy existing national educational needs they do present some problems when attempting to equate awards between say Korea and India.

1.5 National education systems do develop, however, and so we find changes are being made in Asia, in America, and in Britain. These changes tend to be towards prolonging and upgrading education. The school leaving age may be raised; primary or secondary education made compulsory; fees for higher education abolished (as in Australia in 1974). In America there has been a trend towards increasing the period of study for a master's degree from one year to two years. In Britain many graduate diploma awards have been upgraded to master's degrees, moving towards the American model whilst generally retaining the three-year bachelor's degree. Asian countries have extended the range of professional courses at first-degree level in some cases, and used them as a base for second-stage master's degrees. (This contrasts with use of master's degrees as a first-stage professional award in the U.S.A.) One Turkish university has adopted the German model of an integrated five-year course of study containing both general and vocational education segments.

1.6 The picture which is emerging in Asia seems to be somewhat complicated, but may be simplified by firstly classifying courses by length of bachelor's degree and secondly by type of graduate award (that is, graduate diploma or master's degree). The third item of classification is the doctoral degree mode (that is, whether by examinable coursework and dissertation following the American pattern, or chiefly by a major thesis as with the Australian and British model).

1.7 We cannot use this doctoral classification in the case of master's degrees because a university may offer the same degree by either mode.

1.8 In this section I have indicated that the multiplicity of educational models in Asia poses a problem when matching courses in any co-operative international scheme.

2. LANGUAGE FACTORS

2.1 Within Asia we have many national languages which may not generally be understood by persons outside those countries. Cases in point are Thailand and Vietnam, whose national languages are not widely spoken or read outside the two countries. In effect this acts as a barrier to other Asians who may wish to study in those countries, and to persons living outside them from reading their educational, technical and cultural literature.

2.2 A related problem exists in such countries as Papua New Guinea and India, where many languages exist within each country. Papua New Guinea alone has several hundred distinct languages, each spoken by a relatively small population. It is clear that although languages embody and transmit culture (and therefore to destroy a language contributes to the destruction of its environmental culture), a national plan may require the widespread use of only one or two languages in order to take advantage of economies of scale in educational and other programmes. Such a policy has met with opposition in India and elsewhere, so that a political decision on this matter will not necessarily succeed.

2.3 Yet another variation of this aspect of the language factor is where unilateral technical aid between countries, given with the best of intentions, has resulted in the language of the donor country being used in the institutions supported. Such a situation existed in Afghanistan when I worked there ten years ago - I do not know if the situation has changed. In addition to there being more than one major language spoken by Afghans (which the then government recognised by a policy of creating bilingualism through the school system), the language of the University of Kabul was English and that of the Technical Institute was Russian. This came about because these higer education facilities had been supported by America and Russia respectively. However, this situation resulted in lirguistic fragmentation of the higher education system, and the creation of a barrier between the two institutions. Furthermore, the learning of a particular language in high schools could result in students only being able to attend a particular higher education institution.

2.4 The existence of several indigenous languages within a country will probably reduce the possibilities of being able to build up a body of printed literature in those languages, as the small number of readers of each one would make this uneconomic. There is therefore some virtue in employing languages which are widely understood. There is a wealth of technical literature in Russian, for example, so that Afghans studying at the Technical Institute in Kabul would have ready access to the world's technological publications. Such publications may have been originally written in Russian or translated into that language from others. The need for a knowledge of an international language is therefore an essential gateway to higher knowledge.

2.5 There are of course some natural international languages such as Chinese, which is not only native to China proper but is widely understood by important Chinese communities in such countries as Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore.

2.6 In addition to such population movements, the colonial legacy also contributes to access to the world's store of information and ideas. The former Indo-China countries such as Vietnam and Laos were once within the French knowledge sphere of influence as well as a political one. This present Symposium is employing English as a tool useful for our particular purpose, but it is a legacy from the British Commonwealth which also gives access to a considerable part of the world's recorded information.

2.7 In this section I have tried to indicate that language may not only be a problem factor, but also potentially a positive facilitating one. It can be both a barrier to education and a means of accessing the world's information. Awareness of this is important if we are to be able to build up a regional scheme of co-operation for distance education in Asia.

3. DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A PROBLEM-SOLVER

3.1 Before looking at some of the problems associated with distance education, I must emphasise that distance education is itself an important solution to several problems concerning wider access to educational facilities. It is not (as some people still think) a second-best way of studying, but a method of learning of equal validity with face-to-face tuition.

3.2 There are many classifications of educational provision, but for the purpose of the present paper I am assuming that we are mainly concerned with post-secondary level education. (In passing, I would note that successful distance educational facilities are available at the primary and secondary levels in a number of countries. The Schools of the Air which facilitate learning by children living in isolated families or communities scattered throughout inland Australia indicate one well-known approach.) This tertiary level is based on student motivation to take advantage of what is offered, because attendance at this level is not compulsory in any country. The simple categories which I think are important as far as this Symposium is concerned are:

(a) general education
(b) vocational education
(c) continuing or adult education.

3.3 General education at the tertiary level is largely an extension of primary and secondary education, and is normally made available under formal schemes by colleges and universities. It will probably involve a philosophy of self-development or personal fulfilment as a prelude to one's adult life. The chief barriers to access may be personal finance, state of illiteracy, and intellectual standard already achieved in a lower formal system.

3.4 Vocational education is geared more specifically to particular employment: doctor, shorthand typist, teacher, motor mechanic. The various categories such as technologist/technician, or professional/para-professional, do not concern us at this stage. Vocational education may be made available in specialist institutions, or in special departments of universities and colleges. The chief barriers in addition to those in (3.3) above would seem to be national and institutional finance, possible scarcity of specialist staff and laboratory or practical work facilities, and in some cases the small number of employment openings making a permanent course not viable.

3.5 Continuing or adult education (excluding continuing vocational education) is a lifelong facility for self-development through learning and understanding. It may take the form of general education courses leading to an award, but more particularly is offered in smaller units at times convenient for people in full-time employment. It tends to be the poor relation of the educational provision in a community and is often self-funding. The chief barriers to access are likely to be lack of personal motivation, inconvenient time or place, and lack of the exact topic desired.

3.6 I believe that distance education facilities can help to overcome many of these problems of barriers to access. For example, where potential students are denied participation because of a lack of mobility (such as the demands of full-time employment), it may be feasible for the course to move to the student rather than the student to the course. This is precisely what distance education does.

3.7 Similarly, if a particular institution is unable to offer a subject or course because of lack of funds or of qualified staff, we can suggest that a distance education subject or course from another institution may be used. This is not very different from using a textbook prepared by another college. (I shall mention the problem of feed-back in the next section.) How does distance education solve the financial problems of students? Firstly by making residential fees in a university or college unnecessary, allowing the student to be based at his own home. Secondly

by allowing the student to have paid employment on a full-time or part-time basis. Thirdly by reducing capital costs if university classrooms are not needed (though development and production costs will be high).

3.8 Although it is not suggested that all subjects which form parts of formal degree courses are suitable for adult education classes without some re-writing, the facility for enrolling in one or more subjects 'not for credit' by the distance education mode greatly enlarges the range available. Self-pacing courses would enable busy people to fit continuing education programmes into their time schedules, though for others (myself included) the discipline of a set time-table is desirable.

3.9 In this section I have tried to point out some of the barriers to access to education (other than language problems), and have suggested that distance education can help to overcome some of these problems. However, I have not gone deeply into the virtues of the provision of distance education, as several other speakers will have suggested these at this Symposium.

4. AN ASIAN CO-OPERATIVE SCHEME

4.1 Let us assume that we are agreed on the validity and desirability of providing distance education programmes for general, vocational and continuing education. How can we more fully utilise the subject knowledge and professional expertise and administrative abilities which presently exist in Asia? I suggest that a Working Group be set up from delegates to this Symposium, charged with the task of drawing up a plan for a Regional Scheme for Distance Education in Asia. This section puts forward some thoughts which the Symposium may like to discuss.

4.2 I think that any scheme will have to consider these six points among others:

(a) production of packaged learning resources
(b) copyright and translation of packages
(c) feedback between tutor and student
(d) accreditation and validation
(e) transfer of credits
(f) joint awards.

4.3 At present we do have many institutions which are offering distance education programmes, involving many academic and administrative staff members. Some countries have used this mode more than others, or have evolved particularly interesting features. Our host institution, the Universiti Sains Malaysia, is already well-known outside the national boundaries. Australia is a country which uses distance education extensively because of the great distances, and its Universities of New England and of Queensland are of international repute. The University of the South Pacific's use of the satellite facility is a necessary innovation because of the scattered islands of that region. World-wide we can assume that some of the people involved in distance education programmes are experts in their fields, whilst many are competent though not so expert. No doubt there are also some who are struggling along without sufficient expertise because their institutions require them to engage in distance education but have provided neither training nor adequate back-up facilities.

4.4 At the same time there may well be considerable duplication in the kinds of courses and individual subjects being offered, not only within a country but between countries. We must also recognise that some institutions do have better facilities than others, so that the resulting mail packages are better produced in content or presentation.

4.5 In such circumstances there is a good argument for institutions within Asia to be able to use the best materials produced in the region. Supplementary material can still be produced locally by lecturers in other institutions if they wish, and this would also meet any objection that standardisation is restrictive and therefore undesirable.

4.6 A variant of this is the team approach, whereby a small working party from different institutions (or countries) prepare distance education materials. We do have problems of distance reducing the opportunity to meet in order to work together, and also of language. There would seem to be a case for the international financing of programmes for developing distance education packages for special use within Asia, in order to bring together small teams of subject and production specialists from different institutions and countries. I myself would envisage these teams to consist of about four people each, with the backing of a library resource service. The members would need to come together from time to time for a few days' intensive work, but some tasks could be undertaken in isolation. A decision would have to be made concerning the working language of the original package.

4.7 Packages could be translated into the languages of other countries by local translation groups if necessary, but it is to be hoped that economies will result from the use of international languages widely understood in Asia. There may be a question of copyright both in using and translating packages. I believe that this could readily be overcome by vesting the copyright in the financing organisation, which would readily grant permission to non-commercial bodies.

4.8 Because one important feature of distance education is the opportunity for a one-to-one relationship between tutor and student (something which may be denied to internal students because of the large numbers attending lectures), there should be constant feedback from students. This dialogue between student and tutor is an essential part of any educational process, and also helps to ensure national and local input into a subject which uses internationally-produced packages. So the tutor is not replaced by such packages, but uses them as a basis for personal tuition.

4.9 The validation of any course of study may be a matter for the institution itself (especially if a university) or for the national ministry of education. This ensures that the subject or course is of an appropriate educational standard, and helps the acceptance of an award internationally. I believe that the working party approach to the production of multi-media packages under the auspices of a body of repute will facilitate validation and international acceptability. In addition there may be other groups which will wish to accredit awards for their own special purposes. For example a professional association such as a national Society of Electrical Engineers may accept a university degree as having the appropriate content for admission of the graduate to the Society's professional membership.

4.10 One matter which has exercised some attention particularly in the United States is the transferability of subjects between institutions. Usually this has meant that units studied at one college have been credited towards the degree of a second college, where the student has changed institutions. Sometimes credit is restricted to subjects studied for an uncompleted degree only. The effect of this is that a person will have studied some subjects at one institution and other subjects at another, but the degree will only be awarded by the second university. Usually the institution at which more than half of the subjects are studied is the one which makes the award, but there is little reason why study at three or more colleges should not be acceptable provided that the subjects are at

a recognised level and together form a homogenous course of study. In adult continuing education this is not so much a factor to be taken into account.

4.11 If we accept that a course of study may be undertaken using the learning facilities of more than one college, can we envisage the granting of a joint award rather than only that of the institution teaching more than half of the course? Can we have two institutions working on an agreed curriculum of study with the intention that a part should be taught by each body? One or both of these may offer distance education facilities. In this case there would seem to be justification for a joint award being made, and it would not be necessary for the two colleges to be in the same country. The only requirement would be that the student successfully complete the appropriate subjects and have the language competency necessary to study at both institutions. In this way the two colleges could avoid duplication of staff and subject departments, and ensure that the best facilities are used by the student.

4.12 In this section I have tried to point out some of the features of co-operative schemes which may employ distance education methods.

5. SOME ORGANISATIONAL PROBLEMS OF CO-OPERATION

5.1 Many points of objection will have come to mind in discussing the matters mentioned in this paper, but we must differentiate between educational and administrative factors. I believe that the existence of this Symposium is evidence of an answer to educational objections. Distance education is a valid method of learning, and co-operation in the ways suggested ought to ensure that the best learning facilities in Asia are available to each student. Most of the objections will in fact be due to difficulties in the administration of co-operative schemes, but administrative staff are, after all, employed in order to allow the educational work to thrive. Administrators are experts in facilitating projects and in overcoming problems.

5.2 No doubt members of this Symposium are already able to tell us about existing local co-operative schemes. What I am here suggesting is an international Asian mechanism into which existing local schemes can fit, and which will facilitate wider regional schemes. The organising body must have international status, be a recognised educational authority, be acceptable to all Asian governments and educational establishments, and have the machinery to effect the logistical planning and operation of the scheme.

5.3 There are two main alternatives: either to use an existing organisation or to set up a body specially for this purpose. My own inclination would be to make an approach to UNESCO to operate the scheme through its regional office in Asia, as it seems to have the prerequisites for operating a co-operative scheme already. An alternative would be to suggest that the proposed UNESCO Asian University specialise in distance education, and include continuing adult education activities in its services.

5.4 There is no doubt however that considerable planning would have to precede the operation of a regional co-operative scheme for distance education, and I have already suggested that a Working Group might be set up as a result of this Symposium charged with the task of formulating guidelines for a scheme. The guidelines should be submitted to UNESCO with an estimate of costings by the governments of participating countries, in order to enable UNESCO to see whether it could become part of its future programme. It may in fact be necessary for a special fund to be set up for this purpose. However, detailed planning and operation of the

scheme should be left to UNESCO, staffed by persons from Asian and other countries on secondment.

5.5 The document of guidelines to UNESCO would need to specify the overall aims of the scheme; the individual objectives; suggested features; the current distance educational background; any foreseen local, national or international difficulties; and the results of an enquiry into what the individual institutions and governments would agree to accept in principle.

5.6 If UNESCO were to include the scheme in its future programmes for Asia, or were to agree to operate it on behalf of Asian governments and institutions as a specially financed project, then UNESCO itself would undertake the operation of the scheme including such features as recruitment of staff, preparation of multi-media packages, validation of distance education courses, etc.

5.7 I leave it to the expert participants of this international Asian Symposium to discuss the desirability of such a scheme designed to widen access to after-school education, and to make suggestions concerning its features, problems, and opportunities.

March 1981

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6. POSTSCRIPT

6.1 The author wishes to express support of Mr Grimwade (the next speaker) in his emphasis that initial education in any field should take place within the cultural context of the country. Further study may then take place outside that country.

6.2 The author proposes that a Clearing House on Distance Education be set up at an institution in Asia, having the responsibility for collecting and making available both literature on distance education and materials useful in distance learning and teaching in Asia. Such a Clearing House would need outside financial support and possibly seconded staff to initiate the project for one or two years. The Clearing House may be associated with the production of packaged materials for distance education.

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